Booklist's

Guide to Graphic Novels in Libraries, 2025

Collection Development

Readers' Advisory

Programming

Original Comics from Jose Pimienta and Hamish Steele

Cover art from *I Wish I Didn't Have to Tell You This*, written and illustrated by Eugene Yelchin

ALA American Library Association

The New Underground

By Olivia Radbill

From *Putty Pygmalion*, by Lonnie Garcia.

The infamous underground comix scene of the 1960s and ’70s is often heralded as the pinnacle of cartoonist counterculture. Underground comix—strategically spelled with a signifying *X*—are traditionally notable for their subversion of hegemonic American views surrounding sex, violence, and drug use. The intent behind many popular works appearing during this time was to idealize humor and vulgarity while flagrantly disregarding the Comics Code Authority (CCA), a now-defunct, private body established to censor obscenity in comics.

Since the age of underground comix, no other term has adequately captured the particular aesthetics and tone of the movement. “Indie comics,” or independent comics, are defined as all comics simply *not* published by major comic publishing houses. “Alt comix/comics,” or alternative comics, are vaguely defined as any comics not mainstream in content. Not quite indie and not quite alt, underground comix derive from a specific set of thematic principles including, free love, recreational drug use, and free-speech absolutism. Sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll notwithstanding, the original underground comix movement is one of sweeping influence over social satire, anti-capitalism, and anti-censorship in modern literature.

Of course, despite these ideals, in practice the underground comix scene was often fraught with racism, misogyny, and homophobia. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, many creators of marginalized identities found their creative outlet in the underground comix scene. From the underground movement came *Come Out Comix*, by Mary Wings, the first documented comic book about lesbianism created by a lesbian. Grass Green, one of the few Black creators in the movement, used the medium to highlight white American racism. Finally, iconic underground movement alum Art Spiegelman created a comic strip addressing his father’s survival of the Holocaust as a Polish Jew. This strip later became *Maus*, a revered work of Jewish writing.

While the underground comix movement may not exist exactly as it once did, there are many current creators whose work hearkens back to that of the original movement. These creators are radical and independent, often satirizing and exploring Western culture, queer identity, and politics through unique, often surreal visual style. With the founding tenets of the underground comix movement in mind, let’s take a look at the creators currently reimagining radicalism in comics.

Boy Island. By Leo Fox. Art by the author. 2024. Silver Sprocket, $29.99 (9798886200508).

Boy Island is a trans fable following the journey of Lucille, an inhabitant of Girl Island. Lucille seeks refuge from body dysmorphia on Boy Island. Transmasc creator Fox depicts this story through a heavily shaded palette, emphasizing the foreboding nature of the voyage. By way of

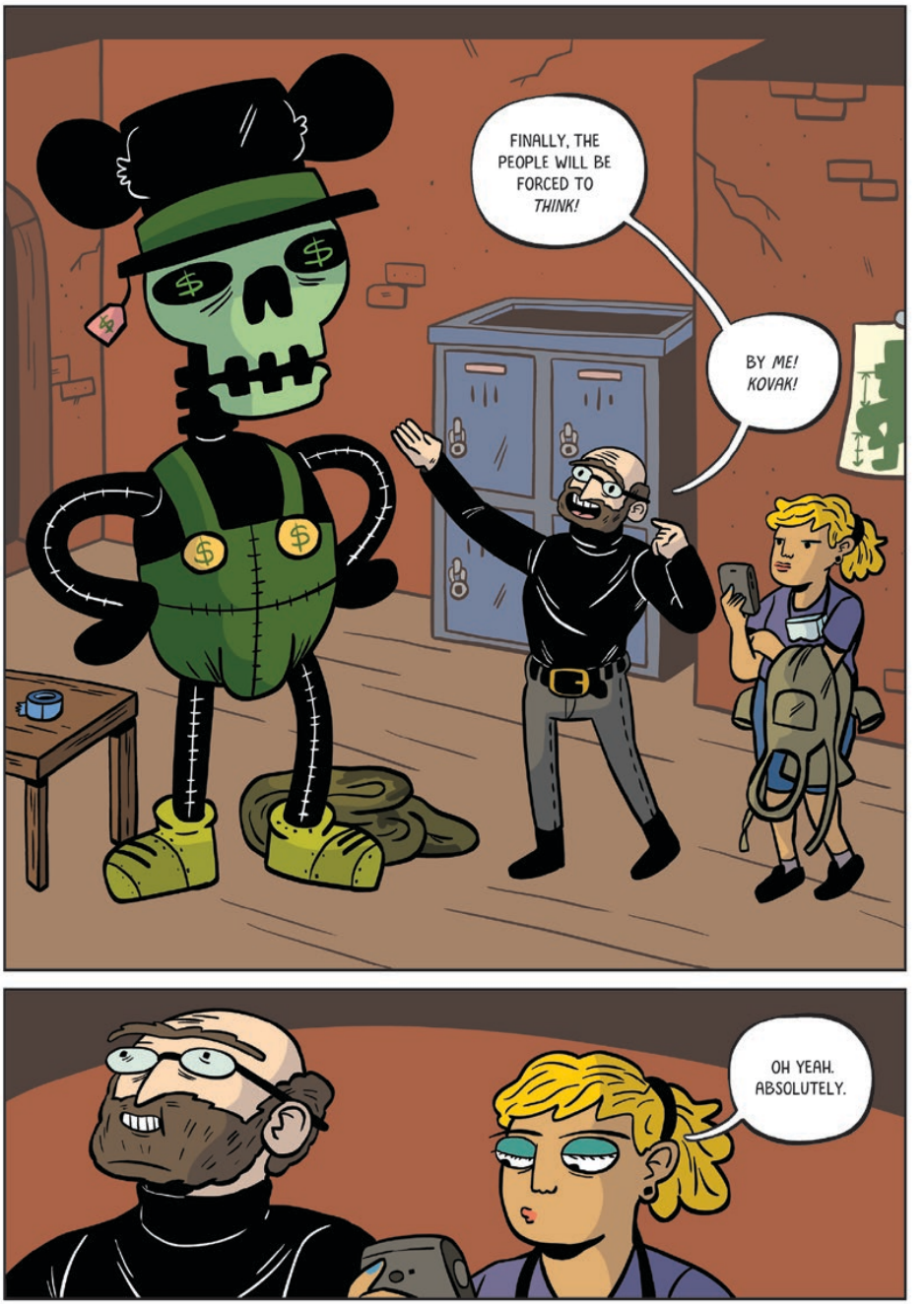
a memory-eating ferryman, Lucille begins their transition. *Boy Island* is a harrowing tale with art reminiscent of that by underground legend Vaughn Bodē.

Boys Weekend. By Mattie Lubchansky. Art by the author. 2023. Pantheon, $28 (9780593316719).

Boys Weekend is a horror story set in perhaps the most horrific of spaces: a bros-only bachelor weekend. Sammie, newly out as trans, participates in this trip out of a sense of obligation, despite their better judgement. Though Sammie struggles to navigate the cis-het group, it is the cult, the sea monsters, the human dismemberment, and the oppression of an unregulated market that are the immediate adversaries. Is it late-stage capitalism or transmisogyny? Lubchansky asks the reader the real question: Aren't they kind of the same thing?

Feast of Grease. By Chris Cilla. Art by the author. 2024. Floating World, $24.99 (9781963314038).

Psychedelic comix creator Cilla's *Feast of Grease* is probably the work most spiritually and tonally connected to underground comix movement on this list. *Feast of Grease* is a curated compilation of Cilla's work. Rife with silly imagery, a sense of malaise, some truly heartfelt pieces, and junkyard poetry, *Feast of Grease* is an odious joyride through the modern underground. This is a great place to start for those ready to dive headfirst into the scene.



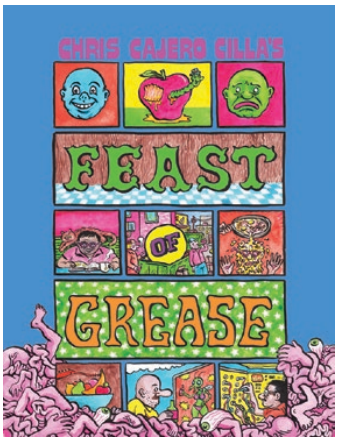
From *Boys Weekend*, written and drawn by Mattie Lubchansky.

Girl Juice. By Benji Nate. Art by the author. 2023. Drawn & Quarterly, $24.95 (9781770466630)

In the same vein as *Wimmen's Comix*, the classic underground feminist anthology series, *Girl Juice* offers fun, frank depictions of female joy, friendship, and sexuality. The Girl Juice House is home to a raucous group of four young women as they navigate their twenties. Accompanying the playful, jokey nature of each strip is some sharp commentary on the role and depictions of modern women in a capitalist society that deals in youth and sex. Read with awe as the gang exorcises a demon that feeds off of attention-seeking behavior, swaps secrets, and horrifies churchgoers! *Girl Juice* is a fourth-wave-feminist-laden radical comic for the girls.

Magical Beatdown v.1. By Jenn Woodall. Art by the author. 2019. Silver Sprocket, $6 (9781945509315).

Parody is one of the most common tools used by the underground comix artist. Though, since the release of *Magical Beatdown*, Woodall has gone on to publish the more mainstream YA sf graphic novel *Space Trash* (2022), her earlier offerings are evocative of the parody work of underground creators. *Magical Beatdown* is a hyper-violent, expletive-laden Sailor Moon sendup with quick dialogue and an incredible fight sequence. In the words of one fictitious street prowler, "Oh fuck, not another magical girl."



Michael Mouse. By Mitch Lohmeier. Art by the author. 2023. Floating World, $12 (9781942801504).

In 1972, Robert Armstrong and Chester C. Crill published a grimy parody of Disney's classic Mickey Mouse character titled *Mickey Rat*. *Mickey Rat* was a litmus test to see how far parody could be taken. Not close enough to Disney's character design to get sued yet close enough to be easily associated, Mickey Rat was a lecherous proxy. The comic is filled with drug-use, racist caricatures, and sexual taboo. Half a century later, a new Mickey Mouse parody comic has arrived. Michael Mouse is a drug-dealing, dogfighting mobster. Yet, unlike Armstrong's comic, Lohmeier's work has a heart: David Duck, a man (duck) determined to provide for his family while dealing with addiction issues. Maybe, in the wake of the internet, shock has less value. Originally serialized on Instagram, *Michael Mouse* is one of the best parody works in comics today.

No Romance in Hell. By Hyena Hell. Art by the author. 2020. Silver Sprocket, $5 (9781945509476).

No Romance in Hell follows an Amazonian demon's ascent to Earth in search of a male partner. Unfortunately, men on Earth turn out to be just as disappointing as men in Hell. Much like the work of second-wave feminists of the underground movement, *No Romance in Hell* is a fun, rowdy romp. Watch as our heroine decimates potential romantic partners with laser eyes, attempts app dating, and decries romantic love. With a name like Hyena Hell, you already know this creator will pull no punches.

Paroxysm v.1: An Independent Horror Anthology. Ed. by Natalia Lopes. 2019. Mysto, $25.

Falling somewhere between underground comix culture and zine culture is *Paroxysm v.1: An Independent Horror Anthology*, a work released by independent micro-publisher Mysto Press. The volume contains a medley of prose, poetry, art, and comics. This and the following volumes in the series hearken back to the DIY nature of underground comix. *Paroxysm* was compiled with the intent of highlighting underrepresented voices in horror. This particular volume contains two sequential art pieces, one by Natalia Lopes and another by Sarah Van Rose. While Lopes' comic, about a gay vampire, is a successful exercise in queer body horror, Van Rose's comic juxtaposes existential dread and social isolation. Though differing in style and substance, the pieces are complementary works in a collection that is a clear labor of love by Lopes. If you're looking for fully independent horror creators to support, start here.

The Pervert. By Michelle Perez. Art by Remy Boydell. 2018. Image Comics, $17.99 (9781534307414).

This unflinching, yet heartfelt look at sex work from the perspective of a trans sex worker is told through a series of vignettes following Felina, an animal-like yet anthropomorphic transfemme millennial, as she deals with depression, survival sex, and the complexity of the sex worker-client relationship. In the tradition of the autobiographical underground creators like Carol Tyler, *The Pervert* is unwaveringly honest.

Pinky & Pepper Forever: Special Edition. By Eddy Atoms. Art by the author. 2025. Silver Sprocket, $19.99 (9798886200348).

Comic artist Atoms' *Pinky & Pepper Forever: Special Edition* (2025) is a fun, audacious entry point into modern underground comix. Two anthropomorphic lesbian dogs, stylized after a little-known line of Bratz dolls, travel to hell in succession after Pinky's suicide during a performance-art piece. Part Catholic guilt, part lighthearted parody of the art world, *Pinky & Pepper Forever* is a work that perfectly encapsulates the absurdism and medium experimentation of the underground movement.

Putty Pygmalion. By Lonnie Garcia. Art by the author. 2024. Silver Sprocket $15.99 (9798886200423).

A radish named Darryl uses a now-outlawed children's putty product to create the perfect boyfriend, Peter. When putty-based Peter sneaks out one night and parties with Darryl's friends, Darryl must confront the fact that maybe *he* is the problem. Using a mixed-media approach, Garcia makes a comic that looks like its foundation lies in the ethers of an Xanga blog. It's weird, it's funny, it's kind of ugly. It's for fans of Jane Schoenbrun's *I Saw the TV Glow* (2024).

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